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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the family involvement process within the special education programs at one urban elementary school. Three families with elementary-age children diagnosed with disabilities are highlighted because they represent the "hard-to-reach" families in the United States. The families speak candidly about their family involvement in special education programming and intervention implementation and their dismay with under-committed school officials. School officials were interviewed about involvement expectations, specifically regarding the family who nominated them. Findings reveal that strong home-school connections can aid in the reciprocal creation of individual family involvement definitions tailored to the resources, needs, and barriers of the family. With support from relatives, friends, and agencies, families that faced significant household and community barriers found strategies for advocating for their children's individual needs. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/SM)

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So what are WE going to do? Family advocacy as involvement for urban parents of children with special needs

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the family involvement process within the special education program at one urban elementary school. Three families with elementary-age children diagnosed with disabilities are highlighted because represent the "hard-to-reach" families in our nation. The families speak candidly about their family involvement in special education programming and intervention implementation, and their dismay with under-committed school officials. School officials were interviewed about involvement expectations, specifically regarding the family whom nominated the official. Findings reveal that strong home-school connections can aid in the reciprocal creation of individual family involvement definitions tailored to the resources, needs, and barriers of the family. With support form relatives, friends and agencies, families faced with significant household and community barriers found strategies for advocating for their children's individual needs.

Introduction

Family involvement is a popular issue in education reform as evidenced by the inclusion of family involvement initiatives in federal legislation including GOALS 2000: The American Education Act (Goals, 1994), and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001). However, special educators have long recognized the necessity of family involvement in children's education as presented in the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 1994;1997). IDEA mandates the inclusion of families of children with disabilities in educational programming. Unfortunately, IDEA's recognition of families has not always transpired into close and fruitful partnerships between families and schools. Research documents parents' feelings of discontent and confusion regarding interactions with school officials (Harry, Allen & McLaughlin, 1995; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001) and educators' dissatisfaction with the level of involvement displayed by families (Harry, 1992; Nakagawa, 2000).

Despite IDEA's promise to support parent participation, research documents impediments to successful home-school relationships. First, although collaboration is mandated, the IDEA provides minimal guidance about what the actual involvement must look like (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). As a consequence, family involvement is often limited to parents signing consent forms for school assessments, attending individualized education program (IEP) meetings, and signing copies of the IEP assurances (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Parents also have the opportunity to participate by supplying demographic information to school officials during the formal assessment; regrettably that can be the most extensive involvement with school officials.

Second, research provides evidence of the influence of family demographics on teachers' encouragement of parent participation. There is little disagreement about the importance of family involvement in special education; however, discrepancies exist in school outreach efforts. Family demographics and perceived family resources can be the basis for involving families to participate in school activities (Lareau, 1989; Nakagawa, 2000). Teachers' perceptions that families are genuinely interested and capable of helping their own children are linked to increased levels of teacher encouragement of involvement (Hilton & Henderson, 1993). Families perceived to have more challenges might not receive clear invitations or guidance to participate in educational programming. Incidentally, low-income and ethnic minority families are more often characterized as hard-to-reach, thus less likely to be invited to participate. In a classic work by Ritter, Mont-Reynaud and Dornbush (1993), the perceptions of middle-class teachers regarding ethnic minority families were that:

> Teachers and principals have commonly stereotyped minority parents as uncooperative, unconcerned, and uncaring about their children's education. On the other hand, upwardly mobile minority parents are often maligned as pushy, demanding, and unreasonably ambitious for their children. Regardless of ethnicity, low-income parents have been condemned as unresponsive (p. 107)

With a dramatically increasing ethnic minority population, it is imperative for school officials to address misperceptions and prejudices regarding ethnic minority and low-income families.

Finally, related to the previous two reasons, families reportedly experience feelings of inadequacy or discomfort when interacting with schools (Harry, 1992; Lareau, 1989). Harry, Allen & McLaughlin (1995) suggested that schools conceptualize family involvement on the basis of a social hierarchy, whereby school officials are the experts and the parents are the seekers of expertise. As early as the pre-referral to special education, parents express

discontent with the lack of encouragement by schools to develop successful collaborations (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Even worse, parents' feelings of confusion and detachment with their role often continue beyond the initial phase possibly resulting in later decreases in parent participation in special education programming (Harry, et al. 1995). This is most evident during the annual IEP meetings with families and school officials. Parents' attempts to contribute are frequently met with subtle comments and gestures signifying the school's expertise, thus creating feelings of inadequacy for the parent (Kalyanpur et al., 2000).

It is not our intention to discount or challenge the current research in family involvement. Instead, we invite readers to expand their views of families and family advocacy. The purpose of the original research project was to explore the family involvement process within the framework of special education in an urban community. The three families highlighted here represent the "hard-to-reach" or "at-risk" families who are less often encouraged to collaborate with schools in special education programming. However, these three families have developed maps for navigating through special education regulations and mandates while faced with numerous family difficulties. It is our aim to describe the methods three mothers employ to advocate and care for their children's special education programming. In addition, we will attempt to understand the persistence and skills necessary to establish allies and navigate through the special education system.

The limitations and biases in this study should be recognized. First, the fact that this project focused on one school and three families suggests that caution must be taken when considering the implications of this project. Although we believe that many of the concerns and issues raised by the participants are common, we do not wish to imply that all families

with children identified for special education services living in urban communities are represented by the comments provided by these families. Any generalization to other families, schools, and communities should be undertaken with extreme caution and consideration for the complexities of families. In addition, we must put forth our biases about families and schools. The first and second authors have considerable experience working in primary and secondary schools in urban communities. In our experiences, families and schools often have not connected harmoniously, resulting in conflict and mistrust. Our experiences are similar to many presented in family-school partnership literature; nevertheless we do not allow our past experiences to bind our current interpretations. Instead, we are providing an alternate view of the relationships between three families and one urban neighborhood school.

Methods

For the purpose of this article, we focused on three interviews with mothers of children with identified disabilities to examine the family participation and advocacy procedures employed. The school was purposely selected for the study because it was located in an urban community where the staff reported problems engaging families, and desired more "family involvement" in the school.

School Site

This project was conducted in an urban elementary school in a midwestern state. For the purpose of anonymity, we will call the school Carter Elementary School. Due to the moderately high mobility rate, the student enrollment ranged from 423 to 476 students during the time of the study. The school was located in an economically distressed neighborhood with predominantly African American families. The student body was 63% African

American, 33% Caucasian, 2% Latino, and 2% students from other ethnic or racial backgrounds. More than 20% of the student body received special education services. Approximately 90% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Similar to many urban schools across the nation, the school experienced consistent staff turnover, low achievement test scores, and high student mobility. Less than 50% of the third grade students tested passed all sections of the state mandated achievement test. Consequently, the school was in the process of great change as a result of the low standardized test scores. In addition, the school district was in the process of finalizing plans to construct a new school building.

School officials described the school as generally low in parent involvement, however, multiple explanations were provided: lack of concern for children's education, limited family resources, lack of parent motivation, parent disabilities, parent illiteracy/limited parent education, lack of encouragement by school staff, and minimal staff knowledge about family involvement practices. School staff frequently mentioned an overall lack of family involvement in the whole school, but individual teacher experiences varied considerably. The school employed traditional parent involvement strategies such as use of school newsletters, parent meetings, and a parent group, each with mixed or response. It is important to note that during school wide social events, family attendance was often considerable.

Participants' Backgrounds

Three families were interviewed as part of a pilot study about families and special education services. Only families with children who received special education services for more than one year were included in this study. This assured parent familiarity with each

phase of special education services: pre-referral, referral, planning, and intervention implementation. All three participants were the biological mothers of children identified with one or more identified disabilities. Similarities between the families were that (1) none of the mothers received a high school diploma, (2) each family met criteria for extreme poverty as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau, (3) each shared parenting duties with another adult residing in the household, and (4) they were committed to the education of their child(ren). Beyond these similarities, the three families were quite different as evidenced by their interactions with Carter Elementary School. Information from school staff will be used to supplement the information provided by the families. A closer examination of the Roberts, Hill and Young families (pseudonyms) are presented below.

The Roberts family. Ms. Roberts lives with her five children and her boyfriend in a small home obtained through a government assistance program. The monthly household income is between $200 and $300 (not including government cash assistance). In response to severe community violence and domestic violence, she moved the family from another state. At the time of the interview she was unemployed, and was in the process of re-establishing primary guardianship of her children. Ms. Roberts spoke of numerous occasions when she received food assistance from local agencies. Throughout the project, the Roberts family was without furniture in the home due to financial difficulties. When asked about the school and the neighborhood, Ms. Roberts explained that she liked Carter Elementary, but felt that the neighborhood was too violent for her family. She expressed concern that her children were not allowed to play outside their yard because she did not want them to get shot and "be a statistic." Ms. Roberts reported that her fourth-grade daughter's (the

identified child) disability was "her attitude" which created a learning disability in mathematics, although the school continually mentioned her daughter's reading difficulties.

The Hill family. Mrs. Hill resides with her husband and two children in a rented home more than a mile from the school. The home was quite small and filled with educational toys and computer programs. During the interviews, the family spoke about their plans to purchase a modestly priced home in a surrounding community. Mrs. Hill was employed part-time while Mr. Hill was not employed due to a disability. The household income is between $600 and $1000 per month. In addition, he operated a small business out of the family home. By the end of the project, the paternal grandmother moved into the family home to assist with daily childcare and household duties. The third grade son (identified child) was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading along with emotional and behavioral problems.

The Young family. Ms. Young resides with her mother and her son in an apartment located in a neighboring school district. She receives assistance from various social service agencies because she has a mental disability. On average, the household income falls between $600 and $1000 per month. A county case manager provides a variety of support services including transportation, information dissemination, and family advocacy. The family does not live in the school district, creating a challenge because they do not possess stable transportation. On occasion, Ms. Young rides the school bus with her son to attend a parent school meeting or volunteer at the school. Her son's classroom teacher reported that Ms. Young "felt all along that she could come at any time, and call at any time" however, it is sometimes difficult due to transportation difficulties. The mother was not able to identify

her first-grade son's disability and the grandmother mentioned that he was "slow". She continued to explain that her grandson has difficulty with his speech and his writing.

Procedures

Field observations of Carter Elementary School commenced Fall 2001, eight months prior to individual participant data collection. Numerous field observations of the school and the community were conducted. Later, parents of children receiving special education services were sent informational sheets asking them to indicate their interest in participating in the study. All interested parents were sent surveys that asked them to respond to questions concerning their level of involvement with the school, interactions with the teacher, and their activities within the home that reinforced the educational objectives of the school. . Findings from the survey data assisted in the development of the interview protocol for the second phase of the study. The first and second authors conducted semi-structured interviews with each family. Interviews focused on parent perceptions of the school's encouragement of involvement and the roles that both the school and family play in home-school collaboration. Interviews were conducted on two occasions within the family home. Interviews lasted between 30 to 80 minutes.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. Field notes and interviews were examined to identify the family involvement practices employed by each family. In order to address interrater reliability, the data was examined for common themes, then categories were identified, and the transcripts were coded. These independent coding categories were compared for agreement during the second stage. This provided confirmation of the accuracy, relevance, and interpretation of the results. They were coded by each of the

authors to identify themes related to resources available to the family, attitudes regarding parent involvement, and knowledge about special education services. The second stage included a research team discussion where each member compared the codes identified during the first stage. In the third stage the first two authors using a constant comparative method outlined by Le Compte and Schensul (1999) collaboratively reread the interviews and reviewed the codes to determine the final themes described below.

Discussion of Findings

We will focus on three of the findings related to family involvement in special education: (a) shared educational vision and questionable commitment, (b) differential qualities of parent expectations based upon past and current experiences, and (c) availability of social and institutional networks. The first section highlights the family concerns and commitment to educational values, while the second section underscores the perceived discrepancies between the goals and expectations of the family and the school. Finally, the third section identifies the social and institutional supports that guide and strengthen families.

Shared Educational Vision and Questionable Commitment

> "I'd like to be involved in basically communicating with the teachers, making sure everyone is on the same goals. That's really the only thing we want to be more involved in" (Mrs. Hill)

The families expressed support for the school's vision of educating children, but questioned the schools' commitment to achieving this vision. In each case, these families were compelled to challenge the school's actions as they related to perceived educational progress. Contrary to the literature that characterizes parents with benign neglect and unresponsiveness or ruthless conflict, these families were engaged in a process of advocacy by approaching the school about the original educational mission. These families conveyed

the message that they wanted to be able to work with the school to produce the best outcomes for their child. Family involvement with the school ranged from proactive to reactive depending upon the child's age, history of disability, and family expectations.

When the parent perceived the school's actions were in concert with the educational mission, the family supported the school. For example, the Young family was very careful to follow the instructions of their child's teacher. In describing how they help their son at home with school related tasks they explain:

> They want us to not to do his homework. Let him do it on his own and you know teach him his colors and like ABC's, write his name. That's what they are doing with him at school, but they want us to do stuff here you know. I make him write what we do, you know?

Ms. Roberts' also tried to convey to her daughter the importance of working with the school, she describes what she tells her daughter, "You know, do what these teachers telling you to do because they are there to teach you and you are there to learn." Similarly, the Hill family describes their approach to family-school involvement. They stated, "We always try to meet with the teacher before school and to tell them how Mark is. Where he is. His level."

However two of our families were not afraid to voice their opinion regarding the professional behavior of school staff. The Hill family was very concerned about the lack of engagement by the child's teacher when setting goals with the family. This lack of engagement was interpreted as lack of concern and lack of shared commitment to the vision. Mr. and Mrs. Hill shared a conversation that they had with the child's tutor about their decision to enroll their son in another school in the upcoming year.

> I told her next year I'll probably go to a different school. I told her that I agree with her. He can improve, but everyone has to be on the same goals, and wants what's

> best for Mark, and right now it seems it's just me and my husband and her [tutor]. It doesn't feel like the teacher wants to help out.

Throughout the interview the family raised concern about the teachers' commitment to their child's education, and their efforts to communicate with the child's teacher. The Hill family expressed feelings of commitment to their son and his progress in school. Mr. Hill emphatically stated, "I don't care what it costs. I make a lot of unannounced visits. They don't even know I'm there. I'll walk around outside of the school and look in the windows."

Ms. Roberts shared similar sentiments about her daughter's education. She related an incident regarding her daughter Nikki's previous school, and the school's effort to communicate with her when they were having a problem with her daughter. Ms. Roberts believed that the school did not make every effort to contact her and made a decision that could have jeopardized her child's safety.

> I said next time y'all having a problem with my daughter you send a note, or you come and talk to me or either you send a note home for me to come talk to you, but don't just tell my kids they can't get on no school bus, and then they stranded from home.

Differential Qualities of Parent Expectations Based Upon Past and Current Experiences

The families voiced their expectations for the school, their children, and their own families. Although some expectations were more clearly developed, it was evident that each family maintained expectations related to a primary goal: educating the whole child. Family involvement often focused upon academic pursuits in addition to the child's behavior and social interactions. Families were concerned that school officials only focused on conduct problems without sufficiently considering their child's academic needs. Two of the families spoke vehemently about the school's misplaced emphasis on conduct at the expense of academic development. Ms. Hill explained:

> All kids I don't care how old they are, kids are going to act up. They're going to misbehave. They're going to get in trouble, but there's always a line and when a kid crosses it that's when they need [to be] punished. But the teacher, he came off like you know every little thing needed punished for and I didn't feel that way. He came off like he really wasn't concerned with his learning problem or disability and that didn't seem right coming from the teacher.

Instead, the parents' goals included concerns for her son's academic skills. She continued:

> We want him to exceed [in] reading. We want him to be able to read Dr. Seuss or something before next school starts. That's a good goal that we have to come up with....We have further goals to see him graduate go on to college. We want to see him succeed and we want all the help we can get and a lot of the goals are just to see him succeed. To help make him see he can do it. Let him know he can do it. All kids have a problem. All kids need certain skills to help them and we want to see him succeed. We want the best for him.

Similar to the Hill family, Ms. Roberts cited numerous situations when school officials allegedly focused on her daughter's misbehavior without adequate regard for her academic goals. She related an incident when the school initiated a meeting to discuss her daughter's misconduct. She excitedly explained:

> They was always pointing the finger at my daughter and I was like, 'Well, what about these other kids?'....The teacher was not listening to me....So every other week I would have a meeting about Nikki and she was in a classroom with all these anger management kids, and I understood that is she and they can't get her calmed down then she needs to be in this anger management classroom...so I'm like wait a minute. It's gotta be more than what Nikki's doing. Why every week do I have to come up here and you guys are pointing a finger at my daughter? What are you guys doing to prevent this from going on?

She relayed other incidents when her daughter's conduct became the primary conversation between herself and the school. Similar to the Hill family, she acknowledged her daughter's challenging behaviors, but questions the school's commitment to her daughter by asking, "Are y'all saying y'all giving up on my daughter? That's not really fair!" Although the parents endorsed the importance of education and a close relationship with the school, their actual relationships were not always harmonious. This is not to say that any of the families

discontinued their advocacy activities, instead they increased their awareness and dedication to education.

Availability of Social and Institutional Networks

Family-involvement research documents that working class and low-income families possess limited or less effective social resources as compared to middle- and upper-income families. Parents' abilities to obtain information, intervene, and advocate for their children is less successful due to the social mismatch between the home and the school (Bryant, 1998; Lareau & Shumur, 1996). Specifically, working class and low-income families do not utilize the social networks upper class families share with school professionals making interactions difficult at times (Lareau & Shumur, 1996). The values espoused by schools are congruent with upper class values and agenda making interactions with upper middle class parents familiar (Nakagawa, 2000). In addition, Lareau (1996) suggested that low-income families tend to rely on kinship networks more than peers relationships for social support. The reliance upon family and close social relations for information and support in parenting is prevalent in our culture (Cochran, 1993). Consistent with that assertation, all three mothers spoke of their reliance on family members or close neighbors for guidance in their parenting and educational decision-making. Mrs. Hill employed family members in her pursuit for guidance and information about helping her son. She spoke about her cousin's assistance regarding her son's learning disability:

> My cousin in Florida, she has a software from grade K to up to 5th grade for reading and grammar, and she said that once we're ready to start the software she said let us know and she would send it to us. She said it's the best software out there.

Families with children experiencing academic, behavioral, or medical problems also voluntarily or involuntarily access institutions such as hospitals, court systems, social service

centers, and other not-for-profit agencies for information and assistance about parenting and other concerns (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). The use of these institutional networks may provide families with 'social leverage' to improve their social and material conditions. In our study we extend the term social leverage to the family-school relationship to show how parents utilized multiple institutional agents to advocate for the welfare of the child and the family. Ms. Roberts's accessed information about food vouchers from her boyfriend's mother who lived around the corner. She said, "We didn't have no food…Because my boyfriend by his mother having her own daycare they know about food vouchers and stuff like that". Similar to Ms. Roberts, Ms. Young relied heavily on the family's case manager for transportation, information, and child advocacy support. When she was asked about the details of her son's disability and services, she remarked, "I don't really know this stuff. I know Michelle [the case manager], she knows all this information…Michelle got a whole pack of stuff you know because she keeps up with all that". Ms. Young's own disability appeared to warrant her reliance on her own mother and the case manager to assure that she was informed and involved in her son's education.

The Hill family also accessed institutional sources in their desire to advocate for their son. When asked how they received information about her son's needs, Mrs. Hill mentioned that "the doctor gave me permission to take him to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist is the one that diagnosed him with it because she gave him a thorough testing". Later she gave the school a pamphlet about how to work with children with disabilities, which she received from the physician. Her involvement with the medical system provided her with additional social leverage to lobby for her son at Carter School.

The use of institutional networks to gain leverage is not necessarily based primarily upon current relationships. Knowledge gained from past relationships was noted in the mothers' advocacy activities. For example, Mrs. Hill and Ms. Roberts both used previous family-school experiences in their evaluation of Carter School. Generally, the Hill family perceived previous family-school relationships as positive while the Roberts family perceived their experiences as very negative, but the relationships provided a point of reference from which to build family-school expectations. Mrs. Hill spoke about her experiences at previous schools:

> ...before [my son] went to the other [city] schools. I dealt with the teacher. Then the teacher would send notes to the tutor or whatever or she would set up a meeting so I could talk to the tutor, speech therapist, and her. Now it's like I'm dealing with the tutor....All of his previous schools it was always the speech teacher, the teacher, possibly the principal, the vice-principal, the tutor and the parents

The way families use social and institutional networks to achieve support and leverage in the school setting is evident. Specifically, the social networks (i.e., mother, cousin in Florida, mother of boyfriend) and institutional agents (i.e., social services case manger, pediatrician, psychiatrist, previous school officials) provided needed guidance and information to advocate for their children and their families.

Conclusion

The strains of family life and children's schooling can be difficult for many, but there are parents who successfully meet the challenge. Despite that fact that research continues to document parents' feelings of discontent and confusion regarding interactions with school officials (Harry, et al. 1995; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001) and educators' dissatisfaction with the level of involvement displayed by families (Nakagawa, 2000), the three families highlighted in this study provide evidence for the existence of healthy and successful relationships between urban families and schools.

Family involvement is an ever growing and changing concept influenced by systemic variables related to the child, parent, family, school and community. Bronfrebrenner (1997) cited the importance of considering systemic influences in the participation of families in children's development; this project underscored the reality of his words. Our study provides the range of expectations, goals, and activities of three low-income families faced with multiple challenges. The Congressional Report on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Congress, 2002) concluded that "each type of family involvement should reflect a match between fluctuating levels of student and family need" (Section III, p. 33) also taking into consideration that the "'right amount and type' of family involvement can and should vary among families, and for individuals over time". The families who participated in this study engaged in a variety of traditional and alternative involvement behaviors, which were developed in response to and in tandem with social and institutional agents. While each family experienced financial difficulty, the interplay between family characteristics, parent demands, school culture, and community factors shaped the families' individual family-school relationships.

Although special education recognizes the importance of individualized services for children identified with special needs the same philosophy is needed to acknowledge the involvement practices developed by and unique to each family (Nakagawa, 2000). The implications of our study's findings provide further support for the development of unique programs for engaging families with children receiving special education services. The assumption that all low-income families are the same in their actions, desires, expectations, and resources is naïve at best. These "hard-to-reach" families may be hard to reach because

we are not offering what they want, thus forcing them to seek additional alliances and supports.

Now is the time to respond to families' requests for individualized attention and concern regarding involvement. This does not negate the tremendous work that district and school-wide involvement programs have produced. Instead, these findings provide a stepping-stone for initiating the relationships with families from a variety of backgrounds. This may be particularly true for families with additional concerns or needs such as families of children with disabilities.

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